**A History of Early Itawamba County**

*Compiled and Edited by Bob Franks
For the Itawamba Historical Society*

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**The Organization of Itawamba County**

On February 9, 1836, the Mississippi Legislature divided the land secured from the Chickasaws into various counties. On February 14, 1836, the Legislature appointed commissioners in each of the ten newly created counties to get the counties organized. The commissioners appointed for Itawamba County were James Rowland, William Coats, Lewis Gideon and David Walker. As instructed by the Legislature, these commissioners called for an election and five men were elected: James Spears Bourland, Alfred G. Lane, John Beene, S.S. Spearman and Eliba Allen. These men were known as the Board of Police.

The Board of Police called an election and the following men were elected as officers for the new county of Itawamba: Charles Warren, sheriff; C.H. Ritchie, probate judge; Lewis Gideon, probate clerk and Russell O. Beene, circuit clerk.

With the organization of the county came a large influx of trans-Appalachain settlers. The 1836 tax list of the county shows there were approximately 280 families living in Itawamba County.

The Board of Police were empowered by the Legislature to select the site of county government, which was to be in the center of the county - if a location, and to acquire this location either by purchase or donation. A deed recorded in Deed Book 1, Page 53, shows that a Chickasaw sold Section 25, Township 9, Range 8 East to Kenneth Clark, John Miller and Robert Miller, land speculators living in adjoining Pontotoc County. They, in turn, donated 50 acres of this land to the Board of Police for the site of county government on July 17, 1837. The new site of county government was named Fulton, in memory of Robert Fulton, inventor of the steamboat, and by 1838 lots were being sold in this new town. John Thompson was the first postmaster for the site of county government. Some of the first lot buyers in the new village of Fulton were John M. Cox, David Patrick, Wiley W. Gaither, James C. Wright, Edward Moore, John R. Wren, William Peacock, John L. Collins, David Files, William Files, Lemuel Beene, Joseph Calvin Clark, William Eckford, Wiley D. Clifton and John Thompson.

Before Fulton was organized, county government affairs were conducted in private homes and stores including the store house of Elisha Thomas at Van Buren on the Tombigbee River and the home of James Spears Bourland in the Cardsville community. After Fulton was organized county government business was conducted in private stores and residences in Fulton. As late as January of 1838, circuit court was held in the "ward house" of Duncan Clarke, Esq. in the new village of Fulton. It is not known when the first courthouse was built in Fulton, but records show that there was a courthouse in Fulton before 1843. More than likely it was a typical pioneer wooden structure.

**Pioneer Days in the New County**

Most of the early settlers in Itawamba County were from the hill regions of Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee. These people were from places where slavery was practically non-existent.

Consequently, few slaves were in Itawamba County. Circuit Court records show a man being tried in 1837 for "bringing a Negro woman, Tabby, into the county and selling her. He was not convicted because slavery, even though unpopular with several Itawambians, was perfectly legal in Mississippi.

Upon entering Itawamba County from long-settled areas, many people had a hard time adjusting to the new territory. In 1839, Josiah Hinds, an early pioneer of Itawamba County wrote in his diary: "We are among strangers in a strange land, and in a wilderness, where but a short time since, was heard the yell of the savage, and where the hoot of the owl and prowl of the wolf is still heard. We are almost in the woods - one cabin only to shelter us and our little ones and a rail pen for a smoke house and kitchen...no churches for the worship of God."

Henry Wiygul moved north into the region that became Itawamba County in 1832 from Cotton Gin Port in neighboring Monroe County. On 11 November 1925, William Wiygul wrote: "In 1832 Grandpa Wiygul decided he would move up into the wild woods where Itawamba County now is. He got him an ox and a sack of something to eat and started on an ox to blazing out his road wright up the ridge. He went back and got his family. He had a yoke of steers and a wagon and put his household stuff on it. He was living in Monroe County then. It was a county. In the early fall of 1832 he started. he soon got out of Monroe County into the wilderness where no one lived but Indians. He got to the end of his road and settled. He lived there in a Indian hut about two years. he then built a house out of logs."

In 1841 members of the Tannahill family of Scotland immigrated to the new county of Itawamba. After coming down the Tennessee River they landed at Eastport in the new county of Tishomingo. A letter dated January 19, 1842 from Fulton to England recollects the journey to Itawamba County:

*"...on a Sunday night we landed at the town of Eastport (containing four log cabins) and the next day we started through the Forest Track for Fulton, Mary mounted on horseback and Robert and I on foot. I carried my gun, but got no chance to shoot. We saw some deer, but they did not allow us to get near them. It was a most awful night at Eastport. By the help of poles to steady us, Mary and I got up the bank and got lodging that night in a cabin. The people said they had never seen such a thunderstorm. We did not sleep much. There was in the same room, three men and two females. This is the universal practice here -- no separate sleeping apartments. We lay and listed to the thunder rolling overhead and the lightning flashing through a hundred chinks in the cabin...When we got to Mr. T's (Joshua Toomer in Fulton), we found all our people well except Mother... There is very little money current here. Mr. T. is glad to have the yearly accounts of the farmers settled by the cotton which can be turned into specie at Mobile...I wrote this in my own log cabin, which barring a few chinks is not a bad one...The country here is but thinly settled as it is only six years since the Indians left it...We live on bread of Indian corn which is the only kind used here. Their hogs are excellent being fed in the woods on nuts and acorns...All men here are not merely nominally but really equal. The other day a man was taken up here for going to shoot a neighbor. The sheriff allowed him to go at large about the town...he rode about the town, whooping, crowing like a cock and dared the officer at the point of a knife to lay a hand on him...Two men have been shot in Mr. Toomer's store...”*

As illustrated above, life in pioneer Itawamba County was indeed primitive and harsh. On October 21, 1843, Josiah Hinds wrote in his diary: "Two of our candidates for representative took a little too much firewater at court last week and one of them concluded to call off the dogs and quit the drive and has left the field in disgust. One of the drunken candidates took the stand in the courthouse on Monday, and after abusing one of our preachers at a dreadful rate, left the courthouse and made his way to the doggery and got as drunk as Bacchus." Hinds writes in his diary three months later: "Was at Fulton yesterday. Had to wade through Bigby Swamp. Got wet and don't feel well. They were swilling down the devil's firewater; saw one poor drunken fellow with his face very much scratched and bleeding. Had been fighting..."

Houses in pioneer Itawamba County were generally built of logs and hewn with the broad ax after being raised. Sometimes the logs were lined on the ground and hewn, if the builder wished to make an extra nice house. Poplar trees were widely used for pioneer house building in Itawamba County. The floors were made of puncheons, which were logs split the whole width of the tree and then dressed off with the adz. The coverings for the houses were usually four feet boards usually made of cypress or oak.

Lighting in the home during pioneer days was very primitive. Lights for the kitchen and dining table were made by dipping a piece of cloth cut into a string, into an earthen vessel with a small lip, where the end of the wick rested. The vessel was filled with lard and the end of the cloth was set afire. Tallow candles were also used for lighting.

During the 1840s very few pioneer women worked in the fields. They worked in the house spinning thread, weaving cloth and cooking for the usually large families. The women made all clothing for the family. The men in the household worked in the fields, where everything needed for home consumption was raised. Wheat was raised in abundance during the 1840s. Most farms during the early 1840s were subsistence crops and cash crops like cotton were not raised on a wide scale until the later 1840s.

Social functions in pioneer Itawamba County were very limited. Besides church, there were very few social functions. "Corn Shuckings" were customary during the 1840s. It was customary for each neighbor to make a "corn shucking." Neighbors were invited and they would come in crowds, to shuck all the neighbor's corn. The women usually quilted while the children played around the house. These functions usually lasted well into the night.

During the early 1840s as more settlers moved into the county, stores, blacksmith shops, doctor's offices and lawyer's offices opened up, mainly in Fulton and in Van Buren on the Tombigbee River. Also introduced during this time was the liquor traffic. Fulton and other communities in the county had "groceries" as they were then called, where liquor was sold by the drink or could be bought by the gallon. During this era at many crossroads in the county, liquor was the only item sold. During the early 1840s, a gallon on whisky cost forty cents in Itawamba County.

One institution in pioneer Itawamba County was the stage coach. A stage line ran through Itawamba County from Aberdeen through Fulton, continuing north through the present-day Ryan's Well community on into Tishomingo County to the town of Jacinto. Early county narratives tell when the stage coach arrived in Fulton, it created quite a stir among the citizenry. As the driver neared the Fulton village square, he would sound his bugle, crack the whip and make a fast , grand and glorious entrance into the town. The driver would stop the stage at a house of entertainment or a tavern where fresh horses would be supplied by the tavern keeper, as the driver took his drink and meal at the establishment.

These were the lives and times of those early land buyers of Itawamba County before wide-spread commercial development of the county and the development of an antebellum plantation society, primarily in western Itawamba County. These brave souls consisting of men, women and children – young and old alike, were simply moving to new territory with the hopes of making their lives better. Through rough times in the wilderness they carved out farms in the new county of Itawamba in the hills and valleys of northeast Mississippi’s hill country. They simply forged a pioneer society out of the wilderness.